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ABSTRACT

Renewing some previous considerations on the "manufactured" split between literature and composition instruction that is currently dividing many professionals in higher education today, this paper discusses the economic and political reasons for the initial separation of composition and literature in the classroom. The paper argues that to help make graduates more employable in the face of the rise of service industries, the university abandoned literature study for a more skills-oriented approach to English and writing instruction. Following a review of the literature for and against the skills-oriented classroom, the paper argues for the imparting of new skills such as critical thinking, in addition to the basic skills now being taught in composition classes. The paper then presents the following suggestions for improving the composition classroom: (1) bring literature back into the composition classroom; (2) use a reader that offers complex ideas in composition classes; (3) emphasize the argument paper; (4) help students feel the "slow pace" of critical thought; and (5) look critically at how economies are structuring society. (MKA)

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A NOTE ON THE RISE OF THE CORPORATE MIND IN COMPOSITION TEACHING

The organizing committee of the IFTE had defined an area of discussion for their 1986 conference this way: "The philosophy of English education, especially in relation to the current debate about the relative importance of personal development versus the imparting and mastery of particular skills deemed useful or socially necessary." I can't think of another area which divides so many of us in America today. And the division manifests itself in the split between the teaching of composition and literature. The issue of whether literature should be taught with composition is, indeed, heating up again -- if it has ever cooled down. College English, College Composition and Communication and Research in the Teaching of English are all journals which have been printing essays on the controversy, and MLA, NCTE, and 4C's conventions have all accepted papers on the matter. Those in favor of including literature in the classroom claim that it can help students critically assess new ideas. Those against the use of literature claim it interferes with the learning of practical writing skills. Nearly all of these discussions have concentrated on the pedagogical theories of learning how to write. My intention is to briefly discuss the economic and political reasons for the initial separation of composition and literature. My paper will propose the following hypothesis: that with the rise of service industries, and to help make people more employable, the university abandoned literature for the skills-oriented classroom, thus nurturing an attack on critical thinking at the very time critical thought was most needed. It is the technology of education which divides us, not the symptomatic split between literature and composition; it is the belief that imagination and precision can exist within the conceptual vacuum of the skills-oriented class that has beguiled and flattered us. I maintain that the reading of literature is subversive to service industries, since it explores and exposes the clichés which underpin the romance of profit. I will

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conclude with some suggestions on how to preserve the conceptual integrity of the composition classroom.

Current studies have tried to address the problems in the skills-oriented classroom but with only marginal results, since most investigations have curtailed their explorations to pedagogical worries about the nature of writing itself, or how it "operates," so to speak, inside the writer as he is writing. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, but when these same studies attempt to analyze the separation of writing from reading, they fall back on theories divorced from adequate social analysis. Rose's "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal" (CE 45, Feb., '83) states that we should "help remedial writers become familiar with hueristic routines" (118), and that a remedial writing curriculum must fit into the intellectual context of the university, but the study does not look at the social and economic context which enmeshes the university. Salvatori's "Reading and Writing a Text" (CE 45, Nov., '83), after calling the division between literature and composition "dangerous if it seems to suggest that the process of the one activity, in theory and in practice, is antithetical to the teaching of the other" (658), cites a great deal of evidence which says that literature and composition are related in very special ways. She concludes that literature helps students tolerate and confront uncertainties in the reading process, as well as their own writing process. She suggests that "reading seems to subsume the activity of writing to a greater extent than most composition pedagogy presumes" (666), but she does not know why. Robinson, as a past chairman of an English department, argues in "Literacy in the Department of English" (CE, 47, Sept., '85) against the combination of composition and literature because he does not see that bridging the gap between them would benefit students. We will not "meet the needs of our students . . . . nor will we meet the expectations and requirements of our academies or of our society." He wants to see in "composition programs the opportunity to try to find a common vocabulary . . . a public language." "I want to work . . . . toward . . . . a public discourse made of self and

community" (495). Edward P.J. Corbett is clear on why composition and literature should not be combined in his essay from Horner's recent book Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap (U. of Chicago Press, '83). The "main objective of a composition course," he says, "is to teach students how to write the kind of utilitarian prose they will be asked to produce . . . . in their jobs" (180).

There are many more of such studies -- both pro and con -- and some of the best known American scholars have joined in. Wayne Booth and E.D. Hirsch, for example, have both argued for the unification of composition and literature for the sake of our broadly defined Western ideal of literacy. Solutions are being proposed, some more practical than others. One current introductory text to literature by Daiker & Morenberg, published by Harper and Row in 1985, provides sentence-combining exercises with stories and plays to read. But the overwhelming majority of academic solutions can be summarized by a recent proposal in Profession '84, the MLA's yearly publication on the status of college English education in America. The author states that "a service-oriented information society will need a substantial and fundamental education in rhetoric . . . Viewed thus, the reunification of the composition program with journalism, communication studies, and historical rhetoric would seem to follow with a compelling logic . . . . Each subgroup now has its own career game" (12). Compelling indeed, when we realize that this kind of proposal is nothing new, born first in the factory welfare programs of early nineteenth-century America. The stated goal of such early services was to make the general working man a more docile factory hand. And note further the author's language: "career game." These words are disheartening to me, saturated as they are with unconscious cynicism. A number of books have already looked at the history of trade school movements and the influence of factory welfare programs on American universities (Joel Spring's The Sorting Machine and Arthur Applebee's Tradition and Reform to name two). However, nearly all of our popular surveys on English education have failed to consider books like these.

have failed to see the economic and social reasons behind the party line, which says, to quote from the influential A Rhetoric For Writing Teachers (Oxford U.P., '82), that "the teaching of writing has value because using written English is a form of power . . . . to write well still creates economic power. If we examine, together with our students, the kinds of writing required in jobs that interest them, they will discover important work-related reasons to improve their skills." Let's examine this statement, because, first, it ignores the reality of economics, and second, it explains why composition and literature are divided.

If I were to walk into my classes today, in the area where I teach, and repeat the above statement to my students, I'd be hooted and howled out the door. To tell my students that learning only how to write adequately -- or even well -- could give them economic power would be a cruel joke. Such idealistic guarantees are impossible it seems to me. My students are not only the sons of those disgorged from the collapsing U.S. steel mills, but also the fathers and mothers as well. What these people are asking from me now are not only new skills, but also the how, the why, and the cause and effect of their plights. They want critical discussions, they want to reflect, to read. It bothers me that current composition programs and so-called "computer literacy" programs are simply more of the same factory service programs designed a century ago to retrain someone to fit efficiently back into a job that may again be eliminated. Technological literacy cannot be separated from the reason for its existence. Today, literacy does not mean the ability to think and respond critically to a text, or the world for that matter, but to adjust to any economy which demands nothing but efficient sales and simple communication to further such sales. High degrees of literacy are not really required from my students when they leave school, since the jobs the composition course or the computer literacy course is training them for does not require critical thinking. Richard Ohmann has said that "Monopoly capital will continue to saturate most classrooms, textbooks, student essays, and texts of all sorts. It

will continue to require a high degree of literacy among elites, especially the professional-managerial class. It will continue to require a meager literacy or none from subordinate classes" (CE, "Literacy, Technology, and Monopoly Capital" 47, Nov., '85). Ohmann's remarks here, in part, explain why literature is not taught in the composition classroom. For literature gives to its readers high degrees of literacy and critical thought, something which is not wanted by those who control the subordinate classes. By critical thinking I don't mean the toleration of boredom -- the skill needed to function within most public service bureaucracies -- I mean the ability to wage arguments after reading complex material. Literature, as well as serious non-fiction (say, for example, works by Darwin, Freud, Mill, Marx, B.F. Skinner et al.) allows the mind to play, to confront, to be confronted, to argue, to grapple with real ideas in a difficult world. This experience, in turn, allows the young writer to grapple with his own mind, and his language, as he responds the best he can to such material. Yet, as Stanley Aronowitz has pointed out, this "play element is particularly stressed at ruling class universities" in order to train elites "for corporate and political hierarchies," roles that demand "the widest degree of imagination and invention, even if these qualities are put to questionable uses." Imagination, according to Aronowitz, is "held in low esteem in the state schools and community colleges," where training and basic skills courses replace thought with structured response (False Promises, NY, '73, p. 90). Overstated as some might think this view to be, I still think it holds a truth for understanding the development of American education from the 1950's to the 1980's, and for the rise of the pure composition course. To me, then, the splitting of literature and composition represents a new definition of industrial literacy for old economic reasons. On the one side you have the view, now dismissed as sentimental, that universities are havens for individuals to find freedom of thought and feeling. Knowledge, culture, history, philosophy, critical thought, complex reading and writing are stressed on this side. Inner life is developed. Literature is found here. On the other

side, now supported by a vast machinery for student survival -- and pure survival it is -- schools are seen as training campus for blue and white collar labor pools. Here basic skills are stressed. Consumption, money, and keeping busy are the values. Computer literacy and remedial composition is found here. Outer life is stressed, while the mass mind is reinforced by the illusion that basic skills will buy choice and power, and that critical thinking will confuse and interfere with the pursuit of power. For the smooth operation of certain parts of the American economy, the last view of the university is stressed, since the other view can be subversive to the future efficient activity of an individual. Dicken's Great Expectations, Hardy's Jude the Obscure, Howells' A Hazard of New Fortunes, Dreiser's Cowperwood trilogy, Celine's Journey to the End of the Night and Death on the Installment Plan, Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover, and Sillitoe's Saturday Night Sunday Morning are all books that might help a student question his ideals, his identity as a worker who will get a job, make money, and get what he thinks is power and choice. It would be foolish for me to say that original thinking does not occur in schooling -- of course it does, as a welcome, cranky, by-product. It would also be foolish for me to say that basic skills education is the result of some conspiracy, when, in reality, it is a response to a real need. It's just that a rigid economy, which surrounds a school, tends to structure thought and true change in order to enhance not individuality, but efficient conformism -- whether that economy is communist or capitalist. Technology is not the problem, the problem is how men have used technology to structure our responses. And the best way to speed up easy choice, and thereby an economy, is to scale down complex thought. Scaling down depends upon simplifying texts and classroom procedures -- thus, literature, or philosophy, is an obstacle to what I will call speedthought. Literature is too "slow" and critical thought takes time. Both linger, stay with you, demand reactions, and may even terrify you. You can't buy them, and then throw them away. All this is inefficient -- the real crime. Programmed composition texts, however, prove especially valuable for speedthought

They are efficient, and quickly consumed for the desired result, thereby giving a reader the skills he needs for low-level consumption.

Now since efficiency in modern society depends upon technique, the artificial splitting up of literature and composition "allows the development of advanced techniques within each area" [witness the flood of technical jargon which blights literary criticism, as well as research in composition] "and simultaneously militates against . . . . consideration of the larger social consequences of one's work" (Bowles and Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America, NY: '76, 207). The larger social consequences of the creation of little isolated pockets of study in already narrow fields is not only the increase of mindless efficiency, or the tracking of people into job markets, or the prevention of thought from subverting consumerism, but also the decline of full reason. Full reason is not needed when efficiency and consumerism operate relatively easily and smoothly. The programmed composition text appears, at first, to be individualized instruction. Upon closer examination, however, individualized instruction means training an individual for a specialized slot in the social system. Individual differences in pure composition classes are defined in terms of one's particular contribution to an organization. John is a better technical writer, Cathy is a better business letter writer, Terry can argue better, he would make a good corporate lawyer, Bill Buckley has a flair for making abstract ideas more abstract -- he would make a good literary critic. Our students are, therefore, socialized very quickly, as we know, since schools have assumed responsibility for the total child. "Socialization in the context of behavioral psychology," Joel Spring says in Education and the Rise of the Corporate State (Boston, '72), "plus systems analysis becomes a process of encouraging personalities that fit into a model" (170). The result? We see in our schools today the narrowing of perception, the inability to criticize, literalness in thought, visual culture replacing our culture of literacy. To put it briefly, our students have no need to reason beneath the surface of things since everything they need has been

manufactured on the surface. Why read Hard Times when a charge card with Sears already appears to be the solution to the problems in the novel? Arguments and inferences about our lives, which literature provides and which are essential to good writing, are to the consumer a waste of time in a busy life. Moreover, as Aronowitz points out, "mass audience culture has colonized the social space available to the ordinary person for reading, discussion, and critical thought." We are losing our "ability to make inferences, to offer arguments, to develop explanations of social events that may counter those that are considered authoritative" (Aronowitz, CE, 38, Ap., '77, 769). The pure composition class is simply a logical extension of technology, because it socializes the writer, helps him consume, relaxes him. Literature disrupts the purposes of technology, because it allows the reader -- who is an Underground Man -- to see beneath the smooth surface of technical function, to examine the human motivation behind it, to argue and get upset. Since "American educational theory," says Aronowitz, "has been dominated by the idea that learning should be problem centered rather than traditionally concept centered, and that students should both have fun and understand the practical application of what is learned . . . the proliferation of composition programs at all levels of higher education may signal a new effort to extend the technicization process even further into the humanities. For in the identification of the problem as one of 'skills' there had developed a tendency to degrade writing to its functional boundaries, instead of seeing it as an expressive and intellectual process" (Aronowitz, CE, p. 772). The isolation of composition is a classic symptom of negative technological growth, because it appears on the surface to be individual development. It is, instead, social modeling, with purely economic goals.

My solutions are tentative suggestions.

1. Bring literature back into the composition classroom, for it balances the acquisition of basic skills with the development of perception and reflection -- the

first steps toward full reason, toward seeing beneath the smooth surface of our lives. Literature helps us to think, critically.

OR

2. Use a reader in composition classes which offers complex ideas. Lee Jacobus' A World of Ideas offers essays by Machiavelli, Rousseau, Jefferson, Marx, Freud, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Galbraith. This kind of reading flexes the thinking and reading muscles of the average college writer.

3. Emphasize the argument paper. Annette Rottenberg's Elements of Argument is a text and a reader which discusses the nature of argument, claims of fact, value, and policy, types of evidence and warrants, induction, deduction, and logical fallacies.

4. Help students feel the slow pace of critical thought. Help them withdraw from the drug of mass-minded entertainment. The withdrawal will be painful -- since they need their drugs to survive institutional life. I use the tutorial method of composition instruction in the classroom. five groups of five individuals each meet at staggered hours and exchange their papers with one another. We compliment and criticize. Speedthought is slowed down.

5. And finally, take a long hard look at how economies are structuring society. Unless as teachers we are willing to help our students take stock of our real world in complex essays, novels, and stories, than the pressing, urgent, reductive circus of the consumer industry will crowd out the slightest bit of individuality in them, an individuality which longs to disrupt, to see beneath the surface, to throw a brick at Dostoevsky's Crystal Palace.

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